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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the integrative function of sign language in the British deaf community. Sign language communities exhibit a special case of diglossia in that they exist within a larger, hearing community not necessarily characterized by diglossia itself. British Sign Language includes at least two diglossic varieties, with different integrative functions in relation to the deaf and hearing communities. These varieties, "High" and "Low" (H and L), show a functional distribution parallel to that found in other diglossic communities, and reflect different integrative roles. An analysis of negatives and questions shows that this difference is reflected in the different structures of the two varieties. L's integrative function in the deaf community is reflected in its exploitation of the visual medium, while H's lack of integrative function for either the hearing or the deaf community is reflected in its compromise structure, involving use but not exploitation of the visual medium. (Author/AM)

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SIGN LANGUAGE AND INTEGRATION IN THE BRITISH DEAF COMMUNITY[1]

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Abstract

This paper explores the integrative function of sign language in the British deaf community. In the introduction it is shown how access to certain language varieties is related to the notion of the linguistic market and differential integration, and is exemplified in diglossic communities. The application of the notion of diglossia to sign language is outlined.

A study of diglossia in British Sign Language is then presented. The functions of 'H' and 'L' sign are shown to parallel those in the defining communities of diglossia, and to reflect the different roles of H and L in integration. An analysis of negatives and questions shows that L's integrative function in the deaf community is reflected in its exploitation of the visual medium. H's lack of integrative function for either the hearing or the deaf community is reflected in its compromise structure, which involves use but not exploitation of the visual medium. The theoretical implications for sociolinguistics, and practical implications for the deaf community, are outlined.

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Introduction

This paper will be concerned with the integrative function of sign language in the British deaf community. It will be demonstrated that British Sign Language (BSL) includes at least two diglossic varieties, and that these have different functions of integration in relation to the deaf and hearing communities. It will also be shown how the different functions of these BSL varieties are reflected in differences of structure.

The Integrative Function of Language

David M. Smith (Smith, 1972,p.61) considers language to be a component of culture and thus an "adaptive device". He categorizes the adaptive functions of language as communicative, integrative and expressive. He states that language "functions integratively insofar as it enables people to relate as individuals to a society or as it facilitates their participation in a socially accepted manner in a culture" (p.63). It can thus be an instrument of identification with a particular culture. Most sociolinguists recognize that language can have this kind of function, and it would be subsumed, for example, under the "social meaning" of language discussed by Hymes (1974).

The notion of integration may seem to imply a certain homogeneity in the culture. But linguistic communities are rarely homogeneous, and different language varieties may have different roles of integration with respect to the mainstream of a culture or to its subgroups. Integration into the

mainstream is dependent on control of the standard or "legitimized language", as demonstrated by Bourdieu and Boltanski (1975) in developing the concept of the linguistic market. The market is controlled by those whose linguistic products are the most valuable, i.e. by the dominant classes, who possess linguistic capital in the form of competence in the legitimized language of the society. Those who do not control the legitimized language and speak, for example, nonstandard dialects, are linguistically, politically and culturally deprived from the point of view of mainstream society. The lack of integration into the mainstream of minorities or underprivileged groups is thus reflected in their lack of competence in the legitimized language. In this situation, however, we should point out that their own language, which is non-legitimized from the point of view of mainstream society, will have an integrative function as a cohesive force within their own group. They will only attempt to use the language of mainstream society (or an approximation to it) for public or intergroup purposes, while their own language is used for private and intra-group functions.

Diglossia and Differential Integration

The distinction between public and private language usage is particularly clear in the case of societies characterized by diglossia, where one group often has more access to the linguistic means of production than another.

Diglossia is defined by Ferguson (1959) as the co-existence in a speech community of two related language varieties, High and Low, or 'H' and 'L', having formal and informal functions respectively. In discussing diglossia in Haiti, Stewart (1963) develops the formal/informal distinction by pointing out that it parallels the public/private distinction. French is generally used in formal, public situations, while Creole is more common for informal, private situations. However, not all Haitians control French, so we may assume that those who do not will not be integrated into the dominant society where French is required. They will, however, be integrated into private domains such as family and friends, through their control of Creole.

Diglossia and sign language

Sign language communities exhibit a special case of diglossia in that they exist within a larger, hearing community which is not necessarily characterized by diglossia itself. Deaf signing subcommunities, however, are diglossic in that two varieties of sign are found, which may be termed H and L, and which serve to fulfil formal and informal functions respectively. H sign is generally close in structure to the spoken language of the dominant hearing culture, and is used in formal situations which represent the dominant culture, such as church services and education. L sign is quite different in structure and is used as an informal means of

intragroup communication. L sign is an important indicator of social or ethnic identity for the deaf community, and thus has integrative function as a marker of deafness. H sign, by its approximation to a spoken language and its association with a hearing community, can indirectly facilitate integration into the hearing community in that it provides access to the spoken language. However, since it is only an approximation to the spoken language, and is still in a visual rather than an auditory medium, it does not in itself have integrative function.

Diglossia seems likely to arise in all deaf communities which have some identity within larger hearing communities. There is in fact evidence for it in several deaf communities, and it has been studied in the most detail in the American deaf signing community. With reference to this community, Woodward and Markowicz (1975,p.2) state that "The language situation that acts as a cohesive force in the deaf community is a diglossic situation". Evidence for their assertion is provided by Stokoe (1969), who demonstrates that Ferguson's nine features of diglossia are all found in the American deaf signing community.

Diglossia in British Sign Language (BSL)

Diglossia has also been established in the British deaf community, in a recent study reported in my dissertation (Deuchar 1978). Like Stokoe's study of ASL, my study shows that the nine features of diglossia are found in BSL. Two functional varieties of BSL are found to exist, and to be

recognized by the community as separate. One variety (H) is used in formal situations such as church services, lectures and public meetings, while the other (L) is used in informal conversation. The functional distribution of these varieties is exactly parallel to that found by Ferguson in the defining diglossic communities. As in other cases of diglossia, BSL H is more prestigious than L, which is often described as ungrammatical, limited or primitive. The existence of L is even denied sometimes by sign language teachers who present only H to students.

In diglossic communities, H and L have clearly distinguished modes of acquisition, and this is true for BSL also. L is learned spontaneously as a first language, while H is taught in formal education, and this distinction is crucial for the different integrative functions of the two varieties. The acquisition of L sign is different from that of most L varieties of spoken language in that it does not always take place in infancy, since only about 10% of deaf children have deaf parents. However, deaf children who fail to learn L sign in infancy will generally learn it from their peers when entering school, or failing that, when leaving school and entering the adult deaf community in their teens. At whatever stage L is learned, it serves as a means of socialization into the deaf community, and thus has integrative function in both acquisition and use. H, however, is rarely learned as a native language, but mostly through the formal teaching of English. Only a few schools in

Britain actually use H, or what is termed 'Total Communication' as a means of teaching English, as most British deaf educationalists believe that sign will interfere with the acquisition of speech rather than promoting it. However, H sign is well established in the adult deaf community and in social work among the deaf, so that deaf adults who have learned English adequately by oral methods can use H by adapting their L sign to English syntax. Whereas all members of the deaf signing community will control L, only those whose education is sufficiently advanced from the hearing society's point of view will control H. Because the syntax of H is similar to that of English, H sign represents the language of the hearing community in a visual medium. But H sign is not used by the hearing community at large, and so does not have integrative function with respect to that community. Spoken English, however, does have such a function in the hearing community, and in so far as H sign makes English accessible to deaf people, it may indirectly aid their integration into the hearing community. But H sign itself cannot be considered to have integrative function in Smith's (1972) sense, though it does have communicative function in its capacity for the conveyance of information. While L is closely associated with the identity of deafness, H has only a tenuous association with the hearing identity.

The different functions of BSL H and L with respect to integration are reflected in their different structures. L is free to exploit the visual medium entailed by deafness and the deaf identity. H, however, is constrained both by the visual medium and the structure of English. It is thus less free to exploit the visual medium and so is a kind of compromise between deaf and hearing identity. This difference will be illustrated by the different ways in which H and L signal negatives and questions.

Negatives

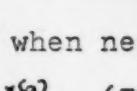
Two broad categories of negative are found in BSL, medium-specific and medium-non-specific negation. Medium-specific negation involves exploiting special characteristics of the visual medium which are not found in the spoken medium, whereas medium-non-specific negation does not. Medium-specific negation includes two types, simultaneous negation and negative incorporation. The first type involves simultaneous headshaking or frowning during a verb sign or equivalent, and sometimes during the whole sentence. An example is:

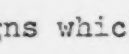
YOU UNDERSTAND

NEG

'You don't understand'

where headshaking during the sign UNDERSTAND has the effect of negating the proposition. This is medium-specific in that two independent channels, the head and hands, are used

simultaneously in a way not possible in spoken language. Negative incorporation, the second type of medium-specific-negation, occurs optionally in a limited set of verbs: the modal WILL, and the stative verbs LIKE, WANT, BELIEVE, AGREE and KNOW. These signs can be negated by the opening and upward (or sometimes downward) movement of the hand at the end of the sign. There is incorporation of the negative rather than merely a juxtaposition of the verb and a negative, in that the movement of the verb is modified, and there may be a change from one handshape to another. Thus WILL ( ) when negated becomes  , and LIKE ( ) becomes . (The notation is based on the system developed for American Sign Language(ASL) by Stokoe, Casterline & Croneberg (1976).)

Medium-non-specific types of negation include the fingerspelling of English negatives, and the use of negative signs which can be glossed NOT () and NOTHING ( ). An example of fingerspelled negation is the following:

WE d-o n-o-t KNOW

'We do not know'

where the English words 'do not' are spelled rather than using negative incorporation or a negative sign. The use of the sign NOT is demonstrated in the sentence:

NOT COME HERE NOT

'I didn't come here',

and the use of NOTHING in:

I HERE NOTHING

'I won't be here.'

It was suggested earlier in this paper that L sign exploits the visual medium more fully than H. If this is the case, one might expect to find a greater proportion of medium-specific negatives in L than H. To test this hypothesis, the negatives in H and L sign data recorded on film were categorized according to medium-specific or medium-non-specific type. The results are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

The table shows that whereas in L, 54% of negatives are medium-specific, none are in H. A chi square test showed that the relation of the variables variety and type of negative was significant at the .001 level, thus supporting the conclusion that L exploits the visual medium significantly more than H.

Questions

As in the case of negatives, question types in BSL may be categorized as medium-specific or medium-non-specific. The medium-specific category is chracterized by facial marking of questions by raised eyebrows. Like simultaneous negation, this involves the simultaneous use of two independent channels, the face and the hands. An example of a facially marked question is:

(continued on page 12)

Table 1

Medium-specific and Medium-non-specific Negatives in H and L

Type of negative	Frequency		Total
	H	L	
	No. of occurrences[a]		
Medium-non-specific	15(100)	12(46)	27
Medium-specific	0(0)	14(54)	14
Total	15(100)	26(100)	41

a. Column percentages are given in parentheses.

Note. Chi square value = 12.17; $p < .001$.

SISTER HAVE

?..?

'Do you have a sister?'

In this, facial marking during the sign HAVE marks the utterance as a question.

The medium-non-specific category is characterized by a change of order to mark questions, as in English. An example is:

D-o YOU KNOW WHERE THIS p-l-a-c-e i-s

'Do you know where this place is?'

Here the question is marked by Subject-Aux inversion and Do-support as in English. Facial marking may co-occur with change in order to signal questions, but in this case facial marking is not the unique indicator of a question.

Questions in the film corpus of H and L data were categorized according to medium-specific and medium-non-specific type, and the results are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

The table shows that change of order is found almost exclusively in H, and unique facial marking only in L. The total number of occurrences was too small for a chi square test of significance, but the extensive use of facial marking in L compared with its absence in H gives support to the conclusion that L exploits the visual medium more fully than H.

Table 2

Medium-specific and Medium-non-specific Questions in H and L

Type of question	Frequency		Total
	H	L	
	No. of occurrences[a]		
Medium-non-specific[b]	1[d](100)	1(9.1)	2
Medium-specific[c]	0(0)	10(90.9)	10
Total	15(100)	26(100)	41

a. Column percentages are given in parentheses

b. i.e. change in order

c. i.e. unique facial marking

d. Note that there was only one interrogative altogether in the H film data, but that other data supports the conclusion that change of order always occurs with interrogatives in H.

Conclusion

Analysis of the BSL data on negatives and questions demonstrates that the visual medium is exploited in L more fully than H in these areas of grammar. The integrative function of L for the deaf community is thus reflected in its exploitation of the visual medium. The lack of integrative function of H for either the hearing or the deaf community is reflected in that it does use, but does not fully exploit the visual medium.

Summary and Implications

This paper has emphasized the importance of language as a means of integration, and has shown that diglossic language varieties differ in integrative function. Diglossia has been found to apply to sign language, in particular BSL, and it has been shown (a) that H and L sign differ in integrative function; and (b) that the difference in function is related to a difference in structure. This has both theoretical and practical implications.

In the realm of sociolinguistic theory, support has been found for the notion of diglossia in its further exemplification by a signing community. In addition, the integrative functions of diglossic varieties have been explored, thus relating the notion of differential integration to the functional differentiation found in diglossia.

There are also practical implications for the British and other deaf communities. Knowledge about the different structure and functions of sign varieties can provide a

rational basis for decisions relating to the role of sign language in deaf education, and sign language teaching and planning.

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